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AUTHOR	Shepard, I. Sue
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ABSTRACT

A 1996 follow-up survey to a 1978 study was conducted to determine whether there have been any changes in perceptions regarding the employment characteristics of men and women since that time. The survey included a national sampling of superintendents and school-board presidents. The four sections of the survey were titled: (1) work attitudes and habits; (2) interest and motivation; (3) temperament; and (4) aptitude, knowledge, and skills. The results show that the superintendents and presidents demonstrated a shift in attitude in which the perceived differences between women and men decreased. However, the shift was significant in only 33 statements for superintendents and 32 statements for school-board presidents of the 68 statements in the survey. Various negative outlooks were recorded under the categories of work attitudes and habits and temperament; for example, women were still perceived as being emotional. A more positive perception was recorded for aptitudes, knowledge, and skills. When these items were combined with other items defined as positive in the other categories, this strengthened the case for employing women. Overall, the positive change toward women was greater for superintendents than for school-board presidents in the four areas of characteristics surveyed, which can be attributed to superintendents' closer contact to more employment situations than presidents. (RJM)

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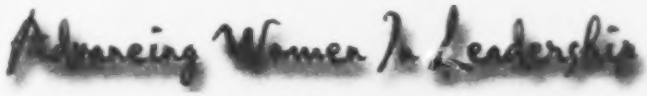

Perception is Reality: Perceptions of Employment Characteristics of Women in Administration

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I. Sue Shepard, Ph.D.

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It is important for women to be aware of differences in perceived employment characteristics as they seek positions in educational administration. An awareness of these perceptions will allow women the opportunity to present themselves in a manner which will counteract these perceptions.

Perception is reality to the person who is doing the perceiving. This perception may not be the truth but that is not of priary concern to the person making the decision. Perception is what an individual understands or believes to be true. The question addressed in this research was what was the perception of superintendents and school board presidents of the employment characteristics of women who are seeking positions in educational administration. Were there still perceptions held by superintendents and school board presidents that are influencing the hiring of women? Were the perceived employment characteristics of women any different today than in the late 1970's after the years of affirmative action?

Superintendents and school boards have great influence in the hiring processes within school districts. In the last twenty years the number of women enrolling in graduate programs which prepare individuals to be educational administrators in public schools has continued to increase. However, the number of women who have been employed in positions in educational administration is still far fewer than the number of men (Bushweller, 1997).

In 1978, the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) conducted research which utilized a survey that contained items that identified employment characteristics. This research found that there was a difference in the perceived employment characteristics attributed to men and women by superintendents and school board presidents (AASA, 1981). The issue of differences in employment characteristics between men and women has been a point of discussion and research by other individuals as well. Shakeshaft (1989) listed differences in words and phrases used in describing male and female employees in the evaluation process. These characteristics were similar to those in the survey instrument used in the AASA research.

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In 1955 Parson and Bales (as cited in Bell & Chase, 1995) indicated that expressive or interpersonal leadership characteristics were attributed to women and instrumental or task oriented leadership characteristics were attributed to men. In more recent writings there has been further discussion of the perceived differences in the characteristics of men and women in leadership positions (Bell & Chase, 1995; Regan, 1990). The descriptors in these writings were very similar or the same as those included in the research by AASA in 1978.

The research conducted in this study in 1996 to determine if there had been any changes in perceptions regarding the employment characteristics of men and women since 1978 was a replication of research conducted in 1978 by the American Association of School Administrators The survey which was used included four sections "under the general heading 'employment characteristics of women.' The related subtopics were (a) work attitudes and habits, (b) interest and motivation, (c) temperament, and (d) aptitude, knowledge and skills." (AASA, p.15)

Methodology

The survey in 1996, as in 1978, was a national survey of superintendents and school board presidents. A stratified random sample was chosen to assure representation of various size school districts. Table 1 shows the strata used and the percent of the sample chosen in each strata.

In the 1996 research, superintendents and school board presidents were mailed The Science Research Associates Opinion Survey for Men and Women (SRA). This was the same instrument that was utilized in 1978. In 1978, 200 surveys were sent to superintendents and school board presidents and 115 were returned. Surveys were returned by 92 superintendents and 23 school board presidents. This was a response rate of 29 %. In 1996, 256 superintendents and 256 school board presidents received the survey and 130 were returned. There were 86 surveys from the superintendents. There were 44 surveys returned by the school board presidents. The combined response rate for the two groups in 1996 was 24.5 %.

Results of Survey

The response categories for each of the items in the four sections were (a) men much more than women, (b) men slightly more than women, (c) no difference, (d) women slightly more than men, and (e) women much more than men. There was a total of 68 items.

In all of the four areas , the neutral choice of "no difference" would indicate that this characteristic was perceived as the same for both men and women and either gender would be considered equally for employment. On all items the shift in choice was in the direction of the "no difference" response between 1978 and 1996 by at least one of the two groups, superintendents and school board presidents. However the change in the distribution was only significant on 48 of these items for superintendents and on 35 items for school board presidents. A chi-square ($p < .01$) was utilized to determine significant change. In Tables 2, 3, 4, and 5 the items are grouped based on the significance of change for both groups or for each group individually.

Work Attitudes and Habits

For the 16 items in this area there was a positive increase in the choice of "no difference" on all items for superintendents and on 15 items for school board presidents. The change was significant on eight items for both groups.

In the first five items listed in (Table 2), the selection of the "no difference" category rose to almost 70 % or more indicating less of a difference in the perception of the employment characteristics of men and women. These changes were significant at the .01 level.

For the item "work effectively with subordinates," there was a significant change away from favoring men to seeing no difference between men and women. The change was almost 20 percentage points for both superintendents and school board presidents.

Superintendents in the current research saw women as more dependable employees than in 1978. For the three items "are reliable in a crisis," "are often absent from work" and "are likely to quit," there was a significant positive change in the selection of the "no difference" option. School board presidents have increased the choice of "no difference" by 20, 35, and 44 % respectively which were also significant changes. On the last two of these items, this made the opinion of school board presidents much more similar to superintendents in 1996 than in 1978. Those who saw a difference attributed these characteristics more to women than men. On the item "are reliable in a crisis," those who saw a difference, attributed this more to men than to women.

For the item "put family matters ahead of their job" there has been a shift in attitude of almost 20 % by school board presidents and more than 20 % by superintendents to the "no difference" choice. However, women were still seen as putting family matters before the job much more than men. For superintendents in a combined "women slightly more than men/women much more the men," this was 41 %. For school board presidents this total was 57 %.

Superintendents were also showing a more positive attitude toward women on the item "view work as a social situation" by indicating no difference based on gender 66 % of the time as opposed to only 35 % in 1978. There was no change in attitude by school board presidents. However, nearly 30 % of the superintendents along with 50 % of the school board presidents still felt that this was a characteristic of women.

Superintendents were also showing a more positive attitude with respect to the item "work effectively with co-workers" where superintendents chose "no difference" 78 % of the time which was a 24 % increase and a significant change. The increase in this choice by school board presidents was five % which was not significant. Other alternative choices were almost evenly distributed between men and women for both superintendents and school board presidents for this item.

Interesting continued trends were seen in several other items in this category. For the item "take too much time off for personal reasons," 24 % of the superintendents and 25 % of the school board presidents perceive this is a characteristic of women. Nearly 60 % of the school board presidents and 40 % of the superintendents indicate women "put family matters ahead of their jobs" more so than men. Women were still seen as able to "accept the opposite sex as co-workers" and "care about the quality of their work" more than men. There has been significant change by superintendents in choosing "no difference" on the later item. However, at least 20 % of both superintendents and board presidents favored women on this trait.

Men were seen as resisting new methods more than women. Women were seen to "waste time socializing" more than men. These have not changed significantly since 1978. Also, nearly 20 % of superintendents and school board presidents saw women as keeping up with new developments on the job more than men. This was a significant change for board presidents.

Interest and Motivation

In the section of the survey on interest and motivation, there were several additional items along with the item "set long-range goals and work toward them" where nearly 80 % or more of both school board presidents and superintendents saw no difference between men and women (see Table 3). Two of these items were "desire interesting and challenging work" and "want to develop their special abilities at work." On both items the selection of the "no difference" category by superintendents in 1978 was high. There was an increase in the selection of this category in 1996 by superintendents, but the change was not significant. However, for school board presidents the increase in the selection of "no difference" was significant on both items from 1978 to 1996.

In a third item, "want to participate in training opportunities," the indication of no difference between men and women reached 80 % in 1996. This was a significant change for both groups of respondents.

Although there was a significant level of change on 6 of the 14 items by both superintendents and school board presidents in the choice of the "no difference" category, there were still a number of items where nearly 30 % or more of the individuals in both positions saw a difference between men and women. Men are seen as (a) wanting to get ahead, (b) liking math, science, and high finance, and (c) preferring to work for men. Women were perceived as (a) more home oriented rather than job oriented and (b) liking to help others.

Men were also perceived as (a) liking to work alone on a project, (b) wanting increased responsibility, and (c) needing novelty and adventure more than women. Women were seen as (a) having a stronger desire for security than men, (b) wanting to participate in training opportunities, and (c) enjoying doing routine tasks.

The item of greatest change for superintendents dealt with job orientation, "are home-oriented rather than job-oriented," where there was an increase in the "no difference" category of 31 %. However, in 1996 this item was still attributed more to women than men. For school board presidents the greatest change was 44 percent on the item "like math, science, and high finance." This attribute was still seen as more characteristic of men than women as has been mentioned.

Temperament

In the topic area of temperament there were 18 items. As seen in Table 4, both superintendents and school board presidents have significantly improved their perception of women in the area of sensitive to criticism and being independent and self-sufficient. In the items which addressed jealousy and emotionality, superintendents saw women in a significantly more positive light than did school board presidents who have not significantly changed perception. In fact, of all of the 18 items, only in the items "give up easily" and "are slightly timid rather than forward" did school board presidents chose the "no difference" category to a greater degree than superintendents. In all of the other 16 items, superintendents were more supportive of women than school board presidents as evidenced by choosing the "no difference" category more frequently.

Even though there was an increase in the choosing of the "no difference" category, when the entire distribution of choices was studied for each item it was noted that there was a distinct attribution tendency of certain temperament descriptors to men and others to women. This tendency has remained constant from 1978 to 1996. Those descriptors attributed to women were (a) sensitive to criticism, (b) jealousy, (c)

too emotional about their jobs, (d) cry easily, (e) slightly timid rather than forward, (f) strongly desire security and approval, (g) warm and friendly toward others, and (h) sensitive to others feelings. Those descriptors attributed to men were (a) stand up under fire, (b) hide their true feelings, (c) competitive, (d) self-confident, (e) lose their tempers easily, (f) aggressive, (g) keep cool in emergencies and (h) narrow-minded.

Aptitude, Knowledge, and Skills

Of interest in the set of characteristics which address aptitude, knowledge, and skills was the fact that there were eight items where the increase in the choice of "No difference" by school board presidents was from 10 to 25 % greater than superintendents (see Table 5). Even though in all eight of the items the change was greater for school board presidents than superintendents, this change simply brought school board presidents to a similar percentage as that of superintendents. This would indicate that the attitude of school board presidents has gradually reached the same degree of acceptance as superintendents. In all but one of these eight items the "no difference" category was chosen almost 75 % of the time or more.

For the two items "make effective decisions" and "are capable administrators," it was interesting to note the choice of the "no difference" option was above 90 %. The change in the option of "no difference" as a choice on the first item was an increase of between 13 % for superintendents and 22 % for school board presidents since 1978. The greatest change in this category, 34 %, was of the school board presidents' perception of there being no difference between men and women as capable administrators. The change on this same item was 16 % for superintendents.

For the item "have leadership potential," 96 % of the superintendents and 84 % of the school board presidents choose the no difference category in 1996. This was an increase of 14 % for superintendents and increase of 18 % for school board presidents which was a significant change for both groups since 1978.

When the entire distribution is studied for all 20 items in this topic area, it was again evident that several of the aptitudes, knowledge and skills listed were attributed to women more than to men. These items were those that address (a) verbal ability, (b) accuracy and precision, (c) good at detail work, (d) ability to get people to work together, (e) clerical aptitude, (f) social skills and tact, and (g) creative and inventive.

Men more than women were seen as possessing the (a) ability to negotiate contracts effectively, (b) having mechanical aptitude, (c) understanding financial matters, (d) having mathematical ability, (e) holding their own in an argument, and (f) solving logical problems easily.

For the aptitude or skill "size up situations accurately," 87 % of the superintendents and 75 % of the school board presidents chose the no difference category. For those not choosing the no difference category, superintendents favored men and school board presidents favored women.

Summary of Findings

The 68 statements in four sections of the SRA survey were designed to assess the perceived employment characteristics of women. These four sections were titled (a) work attitudes and habits, (b) interest and motivation, (c) temperament, and (d) aptitudes, knowledge, and skills. A choice of "no difference" indicated both men and women were perceived as possessing the characteristic stated in the item equally. On all items the shift in attitude was in the direction of no difference between women and men by at least one of the two groups surveyed. However the change was only significant on 33 of these items for

superintendents and on 32 items for school board presidents. A chi-square ($p < .01$) was utilized to determine significant change in the choice distributions from 1978 to 1996.

A summary of the 68 items that were still seen as more characteristic of men or women is presented in Table 6. The perceptions that were found in 1978 still hold in 1996 although these perceptions do not hold to the same degree.

There are several conclusions and implications which result from these findings.

Conclusions and Implications

The results of this research indicated that the differences in perceived employment characteristics of men and women have changed since 1978. The change has been a positive change toward women. However, the change although significant in many areas, has not been significant in all areas as noted in the detailed discussion.

Worthy of further discussion are those characteristics where almost 20 % or more of the superintendents and school board presidents perceived the characteristics to be attributed more to women. Some of these characteristics can be seen as a positive attribute while others have negative connotations and are ones that need to be of concern. These characteristics are shown in Table 7.

Of the 68 items on the survey, 23 items or 34 % are listed in Table 7. This is an indication that perceived differences between the employment characteristics still exist and can not be ignored. Overall, these differences are more strongly held by school board presidents than by superintendents as seen in the percentages shown in Table 7. On 28 of the 23 items the percent indicating an attribute is more characteristic of women is greater for school board presidents than for superintendents.

When classifying these items as positive or negative, 12 were indicated as having a negative connotation. Only three of the perceptions defined as negative are more strongly held by superintendents than by school board presidents. These were strongly desire security, are slightly timid rather than forward, and are accurate and precise.

Of those characteristics under the area of work attitudes and habits, the first four of those seen as negative by the author are believed to be closely associated with the responsibilities women have for home and family. The same is believed to be true of the two items seen as negative under interest and motivation.

Of the items under temperament, five of the six were thought to be negative. Women were still perceived as being very emotional and as displaying this emotion in the workplace.

A more positive perception was seen in the group of items under aptitudes, knowledge, and skills. When these items are combined with other items defined as positive in the other categories, this provides a case for employing women. These characteristics are all necessary for quality work and many are in the area of interpersonal relations. More people lose jobs because they are unable to work with others than for not having the job skills.

Three items were seen as being both positive and negative. These were seen as positive characteristics because they are necessary for quality work. However these items were also categorized as negative because these attributes were seen by the author to be the reason many women are encouraged toward or kept in middle management or staff positions.

Summary

As has been noted the change in perception has been a positive change toward women. Overall, the change has been greater for superintendents than for school board presidents in the four different areas of characteristics surveyed. It is felt that superintendents are much closer to more employment situations than are school board presidents and would be more accurate in their judgment of these issues than school board presidents.

It is important for women to be aware of differences in perceived employment characteristics as they seek positions in educational administration. An awareness of these perceptions will allow women the opportunity to present themselves in a manner which will counteract these perceptions.

Superintendents will be key participants in these efforts as the survey results indicate because of their more positive perception of women. Superintendents need to be encouraged to support women and to educate school board members as to the capabilities of women as educational administrators. Superintendents through their words and actions can assist in changing perceptions of school board members.

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Dr. I. Sue Shepard is an Associate Professor of Educational Administration and Counseling at Southeast Missouri State University, Cape Girardeau, MO .

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